Military Coups in Ancient Israel and Their Implications for Conceptions of YHWH's Divine Army

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ABSTRACT: Military officers who posed a threat to the kings of Israel are readily found throughout the biblical texts. Although officers were often loyal servants who fought battles on behalf of their kings, they could also prove dangerous adversaries if the tide of opinion turned against the monarchs. In this light, it is interesting that YHWH's divine army never mentions any generals or ranks; despite its innumerable numbers, YHWH had sole command. This paper explores whether this portrayal of YHWH's divine army was a natural consequence of the authors' focus on YHWH, or whether it was influenced by an awareness of the threat that military commanders could pose toward their kings.

Key words: Divine Army; Military Coups; YHWH as Warrior

Introduction

The list of military officers who overthrew or seriously threatened a king of Israel's reign suggests that military coups were a well-known phenomenon. David, Joab, Abner, Zimri, Omri, Jehu and Pekah are all named explicitly as either having deposed, or posed a threat to a king and usurpers such as Baasha, Menahem and Hoshea would also presumably have either been in the military themselves or needed military support for their respective coups.[1] The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore whether perceptions of military

[1] See 1 Sam 18-20 (David) 1 Kgs 1-2 (Joab), 2 Sam 3 (Abner), 1 Kgs 16,8-15 (Zimri), 1 Kgs 16,16-23 (Omri), 2 Kgs 9-10 (Jehu), 2 Kgs 15,23-28 (Pekah). The army also likely played a role in the coups of Baasha (1 Kgs 15,27-28), Menahem (2 Kgs 15,13-17) and Hoshea (2 Kgs 15,29-30) and are reported to have had a hand in the overthrow of Athaliah (2 Kgs 11) of Judah.

commanders as potential challengers to the kings influenced theological conceptions of YHWH's divine army. This question arises because although earthly armies had hierarchical chains of command necessary for organisation, communication, and effective deployment of resources, biblical portrayals of YHWH's divine army lack any mention of ranks or commanders. YHWH is portrayed as the sole authoritative figure commanding and leading his army in battle. Although it is possible that this presentation is a consequence of the authors' focus on YHWH, the prevalence of military coups and insubordinate commanders threating the kings' reigns suggests that the lack of officers in YHWH's army may have also been influenced by earthly politics.[2] Conceptions of YHWH's sole command may have developed as a theological insurance policy ensuring that no divine general could overthrow YHWH in heaven, regardless of the situation on earth. In pursuit of this question we turn first to the betrayals of earthly generals, then to portrayals of YHWH's divine army, before considering whether the two coalesce.

I. Commanders and Kings: Warriors of Israel

"Saul has killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Sam 18,7). This song glorifies the commander at the expense of the king and its citation by the Philistines (1 Sam 21,11; 29,5) implies that the sentiment was even known outside of Israel.[3] David's prowess in battle posed a threat to Saul's kingship, and numerous narratives in 1 Samuel report the lengths to which Saul went to counter this threat, including marrying David into his family (1 Sam 18) and trying to have him killed (e.g., 1 Sam 18,10-11; 19,9-10; 19,11-12). In the end, the commander became the king, yet David was not immune to threats posed by his own generals. Joab is presented as David's right hand man, yet he apparently acted against David's wishes by killing Abner (1 Sam 3,21-39) and David's son Absalom (2 Sam 18,14-15).[4] He also supported Adonijah to

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[2] Throughout this paper I use military "commanders" and "officers" in a general sense. This is due to the Hebrew Bible rarely differentiating between specific military ranks. Often the military commanders studied in this paper are simply referred to as שׂר, which connotes a range of positions of authority; e.g., D. Clines, "שׂר," *CDCH*, pp. 440-41.

[3] Auld notes that 1 Sam 29 may well be an extended variation on the themes of 1 Sam 21 and thus 29,5's citation of the song may have come from 21,11. He further notes that the use of the verb ענה as meaning "to sing" often comes from late contexts in the Hebrew Bible; A. Graeme Auld, *I&II Samuel: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 338-39.

[4] Joab's murder of Abner is presented as being against the wishes of David, who had let him go "in peace" (1 Sam 3,21) and is depicted as blameless in Abner's death. The text even records his mourning, lament and refusal to eat until sunset (2 Sam 3,31-35). According to the following verses, the people

succeed David as king rather than Solomon (1 Kgs 1,7-25) and ultimately 1 Kgs 2 claims that David charged Solomon to have him killed (1 Kgs 2,5-6).[5] Abner son of Ner, commander of Saul's army, also deserves mention. Initially loyal to the House of Saul, he supported Saul's son Ishbaal's claims to the throne (2 Sam 2,8) before betraying him and joining David's ranks (2 Sam 3,12-21).[6]

The ninth century kings of Israel fared little better. Zimri, commander of king Elah, rebelled against him, killing the king and his house and claiming the kingship for himself (1 Kgs 16,8-14), before being rebelled against by his own commander, Omri (1 Kgs 16,15-20). Omri ruled Israel (1 Kgs 16,21-28), establishing a strong dynasty through two successive generations before another commander, Jehu, rebelled against the Omrides and apparently wiped them out (2 Kgs 9-10).[7] Jehu's coup gives the most detailed account of the destruction of a royal house in 1-2 Kings, recording his execution of

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were pleased at David's pious behaviour and "all Israel understood that day that the king had no part in the killing of Abner" (2 Sam 3,36-39). Scholars have noted, however, that Abner's demise came at a convenient time for David and it is possible that 2 Sam 3 protests too much; e.g., F.H. Cryer, "David's Rise to Power and the Death of Abner: An Analysis of 1 Samuel XXVI 14-16 and its Implications," *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 385-94; James C. VanderKam, "Davidic Complicity in the Deaths of Abner and Eshbaal: A Historical and Redactional Study," *JBL* 99 (1980), pp. 521-39; Cat Quine, "On Dying in a City Gate: Implications in the Deaths of Eli, Abner, and Jezebel," *JSOT* 40 (2016), pp. 399-413; Daniel Freedman, *To Kill and Take Possession: Law, Morality and Society in Biblical Stories* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), p. 155.

[5] Janzen argues that David is concerned that Joab may pose a threat to Solomon on the basis that Joab assassinated two of David's rivals and did not originally support Solomon's kingship and so orders him to have Joab killed; David Janzen, "'What he did for me': David's Warning About Joab in 1 Kings 2.5," *JSOT* 39 (2015), pp. 265-79; see also George Nicol, "The Death of Joab and the Accession of Solomon: some Observations on the Narrative of 1 Kings 1-2," *SJOT* 7 (1993), pp. 134-51; J.W. Wesellius, "Joab's Death and the Central Theme of the Succession Narrative (2 Samuel ix-1 Kings ii)," *VT* 40 (1990), pp. 336-51.

[6] As the once powerful general of Saul, Abner's betrayal of his son Ishbaal seems to set in motion the collapse of support for the Saulide house. 2 Samuel 3,17-19 states that it was Abner who spoke with the Benjaminites and the elders of Israel and according to 2 Sam 4,1 Abner's death at the hand of Joab left "all Israel dismayed."

[7] On the negative reception of the Omride dynasty in the Hebrew Bible see especially Omer Sergi, "The Omride Dynasty and the Shaping of Judahite Historical Memory," *Biblica* 97 (2016), pp. 503-26.

kings Joram and Ahaziah (2 Kgs 9,24-27), Jezebel (2 Kgs 9,30-37), ordering the deaths of the king's sons (2 Kgs 10,1-9), the wider royal household (2 Kgs 10,11), and also killing forty-two brothers of king Ahaziah of Judah at Beth-Eked (2 Kgs 10,13-14).[8] This level of violence is unparalleled in other reports of military coups, which usually only briefly state that "X killed all the house of Y" (e.g., 1 Kgs 15,29; 16,11; 2 Kgs 10,11).[9] In the southern kingdom of Judah, Queen Athaliah was also the subject of a coup, led by the priest Jehoiada in conjunction with the army (2 Kgs 11).[10] The

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[8] It is unclear whether Jehu actually killed kings Joram and Ahaziah, as the Tel Dan stele claims that Hazael, king of Aram, killed them. The stele's version of events has been given priority in some circles, e.g., Erhard Blum, "The Relations between Israel and Aram in the 9th and 8th Centuries BCE: The Textual Evidence," in *In Search for Aram and Israel: Politics, Culture and Identity* (eds. O. Sergi, M. Oeming and I.J. de Hulster; ORA 20; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), pp. 37-56; Nadav Na'aman, "The Story of Jehu's Rebellion: Hazael's Inscription and the Biblical Narrative," *IEJ* 56 (2006), pp. 160-66, though Robker notes that the inscription may be not be any more innocent of propagandistic bias than the biblical texts; J.M. Robker, *The Jehu Revolution: A Royal Tradition of the Northern Kingdom and Its Ramifications* (BZAW 435; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 265-74, 292-95. Alternatively, given that Jehu was at Ramoth-gilead (an Aramean town) at the time of his revolt, it is possible he colluded with Hazael and they both claimed responsibility for the deaths of the kings; William M. Schniedewind, "Tel Dan Stela: New Light on Aramaic and Jehu's Revolt," *BASOR* 302 (1996), pp. 75-90, 83-85; David T. Lamb, *Righteous Jehu and his Evil Heirs: The Deuteronomist's Negative Perspective on Dynastic Succession* (OTM; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 102-10.

[9] The violence of Jehu's coup seems to have prompted prophetic critique in Hos 1,4-5 and has been discussed in various quarters including, for example, Hannelis Schulte, "The End of the Omride Dynasty: Social-Ethical Observations on the Subject of Power and Violence," *Semeia* 66 (1994), pp. 133-48; Cat Quine, "Jehu's Slaughter of Judah's Royal Family at Beth-Eked (2 Kings 10:13-14): A Closer Look," *ZAW* 131 (2019), pp. 537-48; Amitai Baruchi-Unna, "Jehuites, Ahabites, and Omrides: Blood Kinship and Bloodshed," *JSOT* 42 (2017), pp. 3-21; Marsha White, "Naboth's Vineyard and Jehu's Coup: The Legitimation of a Dynastic Extermination," *VT* 44 (1994), pp. 66-76.

[10] Sergi demonstrates that Athaliah was likely a legitimate ruler (Omer Sergi, "Queenship in Judah Revisited: Athaliah and the Davidic Dynasty in Historical Perspective," in *Tabou et transgressions: Actes du colloque organisé par le Collège du France, Paris, les 11-12 avril 2012* [eds. J-M. Durand, M. Guichard and T. Römer; OBO 274; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015], pp. 99-112), though the exact circumstances underlying her

eighth century was not much better for the kings of Israel. Shallum overthrew Zechariah, son of Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 15,8-10), before Menahem overthrew Shallum (2 Kgs 15,14-16).[11] Menahem's son and successor Pekahiah was then the subject of a military coup and defeated by his military commander, Pekah son of Remaliah (2 Kgs 15,25). Following multiple defeats to Tiglath-Pileser III, Hoshea son of Elah then rebelled against Pekah and overthrew him (2 Kgs 15,30). Only one of these rebellions explicitly mentions the usurper being a military commander (Pekah; 2 Kgs 15,25), but realistically all these individuals who sought to overthrow their respective kings would have needed military support of some kind.

Even this brief overview of Israel's monarchic history demonstrates that rebellions against a king led by a general were not the exception, but the norm. For three centuries, military officers who were appointed to fight for Israel's kings repeatedly rose up against them. On a few occasions, this rebellion was prompted by military defeats to external powers, thus David's rise came against the backdrop of Philistine domination (1 Sam 17-31), Baasha killed Nadab during a siege of a Philistine city (1 Kgs 15,27), Jehu's coup coincided with Israel and Judah suffering defeats to the Arameans at Ramoth-gilead (1 Kgs 22,29-38; 2 Kgs 8,26-28) and Hoshea's rebellion coincided with Pekah's defeats to Neo-Assyria (2 Kgs 15,29). Rebellion as a result of defeat seems

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assassination are unclear. Her northern origins, the fact she was a woman, or a perceived threat to the Judahite dynasty after her death may have all been factors; see e.g., W.R. Kuloba, "Athaliah of Judah (2 Kings 11): A Political Anomaly or an Ideological Victim?" in *Looking Through a Glass Bible* (eds. A.K.M. Adam and S. Tongue; Postdisciplinary Biblical Interpretations from the Glasgow School; BibInt 125; Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 139-53; Cat Quine, "Athaliah and the Theopolitics of Royal Assassination," *Semitica* 62 (2020 forthcoming); Nadav Na'aman, "Queen Athaliah as a Literary-Historical Figure," *Semitica* 58 (2016), pp. 181-205.

[11] Clancy notes the lack of synchronising features in Shallum's (one month) reign and argues that Shallum may have been a redactional addition to the list of kings of Israel, in order to cover a gap in the chronologies when Azariah's reign was extended. He suggests that, as Shallum means "recompense/retribution," the name may have also been used as a literary device to end the four generations of Jehu's descendants; F. Clancy, "Jotham and Shallum: A Redactors Choice," *SJOT* 26 (2012), pp. 289-302. On Menahem's military exploits against Tirzah *and* Tiphsah see Peter Dubovský, "Menahem's Reign before the Assyrian Invasion (2 Kings 15:14-16," in *Literature as Politics, Politics as Literature: Essays on the Ancient Near East in Honor of Peter Machinist* (eds. D.S. Vanderhooft and A. Winitzer; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), pp. 29-48 and for 2 Kgs 15 more broadly see Peter Dubovský, "Why Did the Northern Kingdom Fall According to 2 Kings 15?" *Biblica* 95 (2014), pp. 321-46.

logical; military defeats undermined the authority of the king and likely called into question his legitimacy vis-à-vis YHWH, who may have been viewed as having withdrawn his support from the monarch.[12] In addition, a general with a proven track record in battle and with the loyalty of the army may have seemed a better option for changing a downward military trajectory than a king who had suffered multiple defeats. The narratives about David, Abner and Joab, however, also indicate the difficulties that the kings faced in controlling their generals even without major defeats to external powers. Saul feared for his kingship when David won multiple battles on Israel's behalf (1 Sam 18) and Joab escaped severe punishment even when he killed the king's son Absalom, whom David apparently loved (2 Sam 18). Meanwhile, Abner grew in power in the House of Saul to the extent that Ishbaal could not speak out against him (2 Sam 3). Military officers thus proved a doubled edged-sword – if battles were lost, they might rebel against the kings, but if battles were won, the kings might cede popularity and power to them. Notably, military coups in ancient Israel involved a number of claims, whether explicit or implicit: that the king was incompetent or would be better replaced, that the usurper was the right choice of replacement, and that YHWH supported the usurper. The importance of theological support for an uprising is evidenced in a few places; Jehu's coup against the Omrides in the north, Jehoiada's coup against Athaliah in the south and David's takeover of Israel are especially worth noting. First, Jehu's coup is unique in its claims of theological support: Jehu is anointed king in the name of YHWH (2 Kgs 9,1-13), is promised four generations of descendants to sit on his throne by YHWH (2 Kgs 10,31), and escapes any criticism for killing the king of Judah.[13] The coup against Athaliah is also

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[12] Due to the close connections between kings and gods, the usual ancient Near Eastern understanding of warfare was that a victory for a king implied a victory for his god, while a defeat for the king implied either a defeat for his god (so C.L. Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History* [BZAW 407; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009], pp. 21-32) or that the god had withdrawn support from the king (e.g., the death of Ahab in 1 Kgs 22).

[13] Jehu's coup was the only one to receive prophetic and divine legitimation in Kings, which Beal attributes to the Deuteronomist(s) approving of his obedience to the prophets and his worship of YHWH alone; Lissa M. Wray Beal, *The Deuteronomist's Prophet: Narrative Control of Approval and Disapproval in the Story of Jehu (2 Kings 9 and 10)* (LHBOTS 478; London: T&T Clark, 2007). Würthwein, however, argued that Jehu was originally portrayed as a ruthless usurper but a later redactional level presented him more positively; Ernst Würthwein, "Die Revolution Jehus: Die Jehu-Erzählung in altisraelitischer und deuteronomistischer Sicht," *ZAW* 120 (2008), pp. 28-48. The positive portrayals of Jehu's coup have led to suggestions that the material

given Yahwistic support at the highest levels: it is organised and enacted by the high priest Jehoiada and apparently happened in the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 11,4-20).[14] Dutcher-Walls observes that the temple plays an important role in this passage, as the sacred space is set up in contrast to the palace and its use legitimises Jehoiada and Joash, while Athaliah is separated from it.[15] While the biblical authors went to great lengths to legitimise these coups, something different happened with the David narratives, wherein the authors were careful to indicate that David did not take the throne by force. Even when he had the opportunity to kill Saul, the authors make clear that he did not do so (1 Sam 24,1-7), but only took the throne when Saul was killed by the Philistines and he had mourned for them (2 Sam 1-2). Even when Ishbaal is assassinated, David is presented as having had no involvement and even punished the assassins (2 Sam 4,5-12). David is thus presented as the appropriate successor to Saul at every turn, and in contrast to Jehu, Jehoiada and many other usurpers, he apparently did not kill the preceding king of Israel or any of his family. In these cases, YHWH plays a central role in supporting the uprising against the previous monarchs; kingship was determined through claims of YHWH's support, which rendered a military commander with priestly or prophetic backing a dangerous force. Yet, in the earthly sphere, despite the dangers they posed, military officers were indispensable. The kings

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came from a source close to his reign; Robker, *The Jehu Revolution*, 17–62; Yoshikazu Minokami, *Die Revolution des Jehu* (ATG 38; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), pp. 124-165; Baruch Halpern and André Lemaire, "The Composition of Kings," in *The Book of Kings: Source, Composition, Historiography and Reception* (eds. A. Lemaire and B. Halpern; VTS 129; Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 123-153.

[14] Athaliah's assassination is presented as an attempt to restore order to the Davidic dynasty which was evidently in some crisis when Athaliah took the throne, due to the seeming lack of a suitable male heir at the time; E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries: The Deuteronomistic Historian and the Creation of Israelite National Identity* (SBLSS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 30-31. That the high priest – whose job it was to maintain the cosmic and social order – was the instigator in the coup adds to the sense of necessity surrounding the assassination. See further comments in Lloyd M. Barré, *The Rhetoric of Political Persuasion: The Narrative Artistry and Political Intentions of 2 Kings 9-11* (CBQMS 20; Washington D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1988), pp. 88-90.

[15] Patricia Dutcher-Walls, *Narrative Art, Political Rhetoric: The Case of Athaliah and Joash* (JSOTSup 209; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). Barré also observes the contrast drawn between Jehu's bloody end of the Omrides in the northern kingdom and the comparatively simple and efficient act of dethroning Athaliah in Judah; *Rhetoric of Political Persuasion*, pp. 93-95.

could not be everywhere at once and needed others who were capable of ruling over their army and their people to fight for Israel and help to protect the kingdom. The heavenly sphere, however, seems to have been another matter.

II. One Commander, One King: YHWH's Divine Army

The biblical texts' portrayals of YHWH's divine army are striking in their diversity. Although the Host of Heaven (צבא השׁמים) are commonly believed to have functioned as YHWH's divine army, evidence for this view is severely lacking in the texts at our disposal.[16] Rather, the texts use a diverse range of language to refer to the divine army. Chariots appear regularly, whether 'thousands upon thousands' (Ps 68,18 [ET 17]), chariots of fire (2 Kgs 6,17; cf. 2 Kgs 2,11; 7,6; 13,4), chariots of whirlwind (Isa 66,15), or YHWH's chariot which he drove on his theophanic marches (Deut 33,2-3; Hab 3,8).[17] The Book of Joel uses no less than three different terms to refer to YHWH's army: חילו and מחנהו (Joel 2,11) and גבוריך (Joel 4,11 [ET 3,11]). Zechariah 14,5 and Deut 33,2-3, meanwhile, refer to a group of beings called 'holy ones' — קדשׁיו — who accompany YHWH in a military manner and Job 25,3 refers to El's 'bands' or 'troops' (גדודיו) that dwell in the heavens. Despite the differences in terminology, the conceptions of the army underlying these references seem quite similar; the portrayals of the divine army are modelled on human armies but supersede them. Thus, YHWH's divine army could comprise chariots – a human-made weapon of war – but unlike human chariot forces, YHWH's divine chariots were innumerable or made of fire. In addition, in all these references the divine army remains faceless and nameless while YHWH (El in Job 25) is singled out for praise. In two references – Josh 5,13-15 and Hab 3,5 – individuals are named in YHWH's forces.

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[16] Only Josh 5,13-15; Isa 13,2-4 and Dan 8,10-14 place the Host of Heaven anywhere near a military context and in all these cases it seems likely that the Host referred to is human; see Cat Quine, "The Host of Heaven and the Divine Army: A Reassessment," *JBL* 138 (2019), pp. 741-55. Notably, in the Hebrew Bible, the beings referred to as the Host of Heaven (צבא השׁמים) are never portrayed as acting in a military manner and where YHWH's divine army does act in a military manner, it is never called a host (צבא).

[17] The emphasis on chariots is unsurprising, as they were one of the most expensive and effective forms of military forces; see D. O'Daniel Cantrell, *The Horsemen of Israel: Horses and Chariotry in Monarchic Israel (Ninth-Eighth Centuries BCE)* (HACL 1; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), p. 143; D. O'Daniel Cantrell, "'Some Trust in Horses': Horses as Symbols of Power in Rhetoric and Reality," in *Warfare, Ritual, and Symbol in Biblical and Modern Contexts* (Eds. B.E. Kelle, F.R. Ames and J.L. Wright; AIAL 18; Atlanta: SBL, 2014), pp. 131-48.

Joshua 5,13-15 is a small passage that has previously been interpreted as portraying a figure identified as the captain/commander of YHWH's divine army.[18] In this passage, a divine figure appears to Joshua at an unnamed location prior to the battle at Jericho. The figure is described as a man with a drawn sword (והנה־איש עמד לנגדו וחרבו שלופה בידו) and he introduces himself to Joshua as neither adversary nor ally, but as שׂר־צבא יהוה (Josh 5,14). The title שׂר־צבא appears only once more in the biblical corpus, in Dan 8,11, where it refers to YHWH and is usually translated 'prince of the Host'. שׂר is quite a vague title and can denote most ranks of authority, including 'commander/army officer, prince, court official, tribal chief/clan leader, a district governor, a religious leader, a musical leader or chief herdsman.'[19] Here, the epithet is often translated "commander" for a few reasons: because the figure carries a sword, the scene precedes the Jericho victory, and because many scholars seemingly presume that the heavenly army would have had ranks like the human armies.

The question of how to interpret the role of the שׂר־צבא יהוה, however, is not as straightforward as this. On the one hand, an appearance of a divine figure bearing a drawn sword has been noted to be a positive omen in biblical and Neo-Assyrian literature. Van Seters and Römer observe, for example, that Joshua's encounter is similar to a vision of Ištar that Aššurbanipal receives before his campaign against Elam, wherein Ištar stands before him with a

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[18] For example, Hawk argues that the encounter reveals that the heavenly armies are mobilized to fight alongside the human army; D.L. Hawk, *Joshua* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 83. Boling and Wright view the figure as Joshua's 'heavenly counterpart', which implies that he was the leader of the divine army as Joshua was leader of the human army; R.G. Boling and G.E. Wright, *Joshua: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 6; London: Doubleday, 1982), p. 198; see also V. Fritz, *Das Buch Josua* (HAT I/7; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1994), p. 63. Miller argues that the figure links YHWH's 'cosmic army' with Israel's holy wars and indicates that Israel's army would be led by YHWH's divine army; P.D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 131. Miller and Tucker observe that the host could refer to a range of entities, including the angels, the heavenly bodies (cf. Judg 5,20) or Israel's army; J.M. Miller and G.M. Tucker, *The Book of Joshua* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 49. Soggin, meanwhile, cites Judg 5,20 and Josh 10,12-13a as examples of the heavenly bodies serving as a military force, though he also views the divine figure of Josh 5 as one of YHWH's hypostases, which is not widely followed; J.A. Soggin, *Joshua: A Commentary* (trans. R.A. Wilson; OTL; London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 78.

[19] Clines, 'שׂר', pp. 440-41.

drawn sword and bow and promises to fight on his behalf.[20] More generally, Hawk notes that the appearance of a divine being before battle is an element of numerous ancient Near Eastern examples of war literature.[21] On the other hand, a divine figure bearing a drawn sword does not necessarily indicate military activity elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible: 'messenger' (מלאך) figures appear at times with drawn swords in non-military contexts (e.g., Num 22,23; 1 Chron 21,16).[22] Scholars have observed a number of parallels between the שַׂר־ צבא יהוה and the more common מלאך figures, including their singular appearance, their bearing drawn swords and their intermediary role in relaying messages from YHWH to the human individual(s).[23] Furthermore, the שַׂר־צבא יהוה in Josh 5 does not act in a military manner, but commands Joshua to remove the sandals from his feet because he is standing on holy ground. The reference to holy ground may be because the appearance of a divine figure could serve as an etiological element, legitimizing a sanctuary or temple.[24] Here, however, the reference seems intended to draw parallels with Exod 3,5 (wherein YHWH tells Moses to remove his sandals at the burning bush, for he was standing on holy ground) — thus casting Joshua in the mould of Moses.[25] The presence of the divine figure thus appears to foreshadow the conquest of Jericho, while also drawing the reader's attention backwards to Moses' encounter at the burning bush.[26] Although some have argued that the original message of the divine

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[20] J. Van Seters, 'Joshua's Campaign of Canaan and Near Eastern Historiography', in V.P. Long (ed.), *Israel's Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography* (SBTS 7; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 170-80 (pp. 178-79); T. Römer, 'Joshua's Encounter with the Commander of Yhwh's Army (Josh 5.13-15): Literary Construction or Reflection of Royal Ritual?' in B.E. Kelle, F.R. Ames and J.L. Wright (eds.), *Warfare, Ritual, and Symbol in Biblical and Modern Contexts* (AIAL 18; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), pp. 49-63, 56-60.

[21] Hawk, *Joshua*, p. 83.

[22] Although they often have an adversarial role; Hawk, *Joshua*, p. 83.

[23] E.g., Butler, *Joshua*, p. 61; Boling and Wright, *Joshua*, p. 198.

[24] M. Noth, *Das Buch Josua* (HAT I/7; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1971), pp. 37-38; Miller and Tucker, *Book of Joshua*, p. 49. Miller argues that it could be a reference to a temple in Gilgal (cf. Josh 5,10; Miller, *The Divine Warrior*, p. 129), although the mention of Jericho in 5.13 seems to indicate a change in narrative location from 5,10.

[25] Fritz, *Das Buch Josua*, 63; T.C. Butler, *Joshua* (WBC 7; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 61.

[26] Römer argues that Josh 5 as a whole, with its themes of revelation, Passover, circumcision, and the crossing of a body of water, points concentrically backwards to the beginning of the Moses narratives; Römer, 'Joshua's Encounter', pp. 53-54. Miller and Tucker argue that Joshua is elevated to

figure was lost in transmission and replaced with the quote from Exodus, it is also possible that Joshua is doubly-legitimized via comparison with Moses and the appearance of a divine figure before battle.[27]

In this light, it seems that the role of the שַׂר־צבא יהוה is more literary than military. Any mention of a divine army is noticeably lacking from the conquest of Jericho in Josh 6 and even from the book of Joshua more broadly. If the figure is intended to have a military role it seems more plausible to view him as a divine commander of the human host of YHWH, which would also explain Joshua prostrating himself before him (Josh 5,14).[28] In addition, as noted above, biblical references to YHWH's divine army tend to refer to the army as a plural rather than singling out individual figures. The presentation of a single figure in Josh 5,13-15 thus has more in common with the מלאכים than it does with other biblical references to the host of heaven or the divine army. Whereas a מלאך figure appears alone in, for example, Gen 16,7-11; 22,11-15; 31,11; Exod 3,2; Num 22,22-35; Judg 2,1-4; 6,11-12; 13,3-21; 2 Sam 24,16; 2 Kgs 1,3; 2 Kgs 19,35; 1 Chron 21,16, individuals are only singled out in YHWH's divine army once elsewhere in the biblical texts – in Hab 3,5.

Habakkuk 3:5 mentions Rešep and Deber marching at YHWH's side. Rešep is widely recognised to have been an important deity in Late Bronze Age Syria, Canaan, and Egypt, although his cult declined in popularity during the Iron Age.[29] In Hab 3, he seems to be included in YHWH's retinue as a

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Moses' level; Miller and Tucker, *Book of Joshua*, p. 50, though the brevity of the account makes this difficult to ascertain.

[27] Wright and Boling argue that the current text reflects efforts to preserve a longer account that suffered in transmission; Boling and Wright, *Joshua*, p. 196. Fritz argues that Josh 5,13-14a may be an older fragment which was supplemented with 5,14b-15 as the martial aspect of 5.13-14a is not present in 5,14b-15; Fritz, *Das Buch Josua*, pp. 63-64. In contrast, Van Seters states that the unit gives no direct indication of being a fragment of an older tradition; Van Seters, 'Joshua's Campaign', p. 178.

[28] If the divine commander was of the human army then Joshua's prostration to his superior might be less surprising than him bowing down to a figure from the host of heaven – an action forbidden elsewhere (e.g., Deut 4,19; 17,3; Zeph 1,4-5; 2 Kgs 17,16; Jer 19,13). Notably the verb ישתחו is missing in the LXX, and Römer proposes it may have been added to MT to emphasise Joshua's "pious" behaviour; Römer, "Joshua's Encounter," p. 52 n. 9. However, in light of the fact that to bow down to any of the host is forbidden elsewhere, it is more likely that the LXX omitted the phrase to avoid casting Joshua as potentially idolatrous.

[29] W.J. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Rešep* (AOS 8; New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1976), pp. 2-55; M.M. Münnich, *The God Resheph in the Ancient Near East* (ORA 11; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), pp. 25-214. The decline of Rešep's cult may be reflected in the Hebrew Bible, wherein he

minor deity subordinate to YHWH and was probably associated with bringing plague and having connections to the underworld.[30] Deber, meanwhile, is usually understood to refer to "pestilence," though Münnich notes any connection to the deity *[d]da-bi-ir*; *[d]da-bi-ru* is somewhat tenuous, as the only references to this deity are from Ebla in the mid-3rd millennium BCE.[31] Nevertheless, the image depicted in Hab 3,3-7 is clear; YHWH came in a theophany from Mount Paran, shining like the sun, with minor deities or divine figures marching around him and forming his retinue.[32] Whether Rešep and Deber should be understood as military commanders within this retinue is uncertain; their positioning around YHWH indicates his superiority but as the army's march is

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appears eight times, but with varying degrees of demythologisation; Münnich lists these as Deut 32,24; Pss 76,4; 78,48; Job 5,7; Songs 8,6; Hab 3,5; Sir 3,18; 1 Chr 7,25 in *Resheph*, pp. 215-16; Fulco omits Sir 3,18; Fulco, *Rešep*, pp. 56-62.

[30] Münnich, *Resheph*, pp. 217-19. Rudnig-Zelt emphasises that Rešep appears here as a deity in close connection with Yahweh, not as a demon. She also notes that Rešep only ever appears in Yahweh's negative or destructive forces; S. Rudnig-Zelt, "JHWH und Ræšep: zu JHWHs Umgang mit einem syrischen Pestgott," *VT* 65 (2015), pp. 247-64.

[31] Münnich, *Resheph*, p. 217. Andersen argues that Hab 3,5 is one of a few texts referring to "four destroyers," however the argument seems stretched and is not persuasive with regard to Deut 33,2; F.I. Andersen, *Habakkuk: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25; London: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 300-06.

[32] The solar imagery in this passage is often compared to that of Deut 33,2 and Shupak interprets it in light of Egyptian ideas; Nili Shupak, "The God from Teman and the Egyptian Sun God: A Reconsideration of Habakkuk 3,3-7," *JANES* 28 (2001), pp. 97-116. The amount of solar imagery and beliefs evidenced in the Southern Levant, however, suggests that Egypt need not be our first port of call for interpretation of biblical solar imagery. See, for example J. Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel* (JSOTS 111; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 233-36. Dion argues for a double inheritance of Egyptian and Canaanite ideas: P.E. Dion, "YHWH as Storm-God and Sun-God: The Double Legacy of Egypt and Canaan as Reflected in Psalm 104," *ZAW* 103 (1991), pp. 43-71. Smith notes the Near Eastern background of solar imagery and solar aspects of royalty more generally and argues for a two stage development, wherein general solar language increased in importance during the period of the monarchy; Mark S. Smith, "The Near Eastern Background of Solar Language for Yahweh," *JBL* 109 (1990), pp. 29-39.

more of a display of power than engagement of an enemy, their exact roles are not clear.[33]

With regard to generals and officers, then, the biblical portrayals of YHWH's divine army sharply diverge from the realities of human armies. The only two texts that might be considered to mention divine military commanders are Josh 5,13-15, wherein the שַׂר־צבא יהוה seems best understood as a literary phenomenon or, at least, as the commander of the human army and Hab 3,5, wherein the roles of Rešep and Deber are unclear. Other than these, the vast majority of references to the divine army portray them as a nameless, faceless mass of beings who accompany YHWH in his military endeavours and merit no further comment. While human generals could make a name for themselves fighting battles on behalf of their kings, the divine army was another matter. YHWH led the fight for his own name and leadership of his divine army was seemingly not entrusted to any other beings. The question we turn to now is whether this was a natural consequence of authorial focus on YHWH, or whether the threats posed by human generals influenced these theological conceptions of the heavenly realm.

III. On Earth as it is in Heaven?

Handy's *Among the Host of Heaven* draws attention to similarities between ancient authors' conceptions of the divine and their own earthly bureaucracies.[34] Although perhaps not all scholars would view the intertwining of heaven and divine to the same extent as Handy, the impact of earthly reality on authors' portrayals of heaven is clear. Pongratz-Leisten and Flynn, in particular, have recently drawn attention to the impact of earthly politics on conceptualizations of YHWH, but to what extent earthly political realities affected the biblical authors' conceptions of YHWH's divine army is up for discussion.[35] With regard to Josh 5,13-15, Boling and Wright's view that the שַׂר־צבא יהוה was the "heavenly counterpart" to Joshua suggests an assumption of parallelism; if earthly armies had generals then YHWH's divine army must have had them as well.[36] Yet, as noted above, there is very little evidence available in

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[33] Aron Pinker, "God's C[3] in Habakkuk 3," *ZAW* 115 (2003), pp. 261-65 outlines numerous ways in which YHWH communicates with his troops in Hab 3, but it is unclear whether the commands were to the entire army, or to officers to be passed on to the troops.

[34] Lowell K. Handy, Among the Host of Heaven: Syro-Palestinian Pantheons as Bureaucracy (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994).

[35] Beate Pongratz-Leisten, "Divine Agency and Astralization of the Gods in Mesopotamia," in *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism* (ed. B. Pongratz-Leisten; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2001), pp. 137-85; Shawn W. Flynn, *YHWH is King: The Development of Divine Kingship in Ancient Israel* (VTSup 159; Leiden: Brill, 2014).

[36] Boling and Wright, *Joshua*, p. 198.

the biblical texts to support such parallelism. Rather, what we are presented with is necessary differences – some similarities between the earthly and divine armies exist, usually with regard to chariots and basic weaponry, but they are portrayed such that the differences are very clear. Both armies used chariots – the weapon of choice in the Iron Age – but YHWH's chariots were of fire, whirlwind and innumerable numbers. Similarly, YHWH may have fought with a bow and arrows, a spear and a sword, but they were of divine, not human power (see, for example, Pss 7,13; 18,14; 77,17; Ezek 21,1-14; Hab 3,8-11).[37] Such differences were, I contend, necessary to avoid associating YHWH with the historical fragilities of Israel and Judah's human armies. With the possible exception of Ahab's chariot forces in the ninth century BCE, the human armies of Israel and Judah were not especially strong and were regularly defeated by the nations around them.[38] Given the close connections between kings and gods in warfare, the biblical authors required explanations for military defeats that avoided portraying YHWH as having been defeated by the enemy gods.[39] This was often achieved by portraying the defeat as YHWH's plan to punish his people for their sins (e.g., 1 Kgs 22,19-23; 2 Kgs 17,7-18), a phenomenon also found in the Mesha stele that presents Israel's defeat of Moab as Chemosh punishing his people.[40] However, I suggest it was also achieved by portraying YHWH's divine army as different to the earthly army. While the people of Israel and Judah may have been aware of the weakness of their military as

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[37] On divine weaponry see, e.g., Michael L. Barré, "Yahweh Gears up for Battle: Habakkuk 3,9a," *Biblica* 87 (2006), pp. 75-84; Martin Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven: God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* (OBO 169; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), pp. 158-95, 241-64. Bloch-Smith notes that changing military tactics over the centuries led to changes in the way YHWH was depicted in warfare, from earlier portrayals presenting him marching out at the head of his army to later ones depicting him commanding foreign armies as a commander-in-chief; Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "The Impact of Siege Warfare on Biblical Conceptualizations of YHWH," *JBL* 137 (2018), pp. 19-28.

[38] In the battle of Qarqar (853 BCE) a coalition of forces led by King Ahab of Israel forced the army of Shalmaneser III to retreat. The biblical texts do not record the victory, most likely to avoid giving Ahab any positive associations, though Na'aman has suggested that a memory of the battle of Qarqar might underlie 1 Kgs 22; Nadav Na'aman, "Was Ahab Killed by an Assyrian Arrow in the Battle of Qarqar?" *UF* 37 (2005), pp. 461-74. See, however, Sergi's response to that proposal: "The Omride Dynasty," pp. 514-15.

[39] Crouch, *War and Ethics*, pp. 21-32.

[40] J.B. Burns, "Why Did the Besieging Army Withdraw? (II Reg 3,27)," *ZAW* 102 (1990), pp. 187–94.

compared to the major powers of the day, no such weakness is found in portrayals of YHWH's divine army.

Another difference between the two armies is the lack of officers nd insubordination in YHWH's divine army. YHWH does not seem to have officers in his army, and there are no traditions reported of a divine military commander rebelling against YHWH. This could be explained in a number of ways. First, it is possible that the biblical authors only wanted to make statements about YHWH's prowess in battle – the presence divine army was presumed, but not overly important as long as YHWH's power was recognised. Second, the fact that YHWH occupied both the roles of king and commander may have lessened the need for conceptions of divine military officers – YHWH fought on his own behalf. Third, any mention of divine military commanders may have been avoided in order to protect theologies of divine kingship from the potential chaos a military commander could cause. This may have been especially relevant during periods of royal upheaval, if military coups and defeats on earth led to questions about the security of kingship in the divine realm. Any one of these may be correct and so may a combination of all three; proving any one specific answer in this regard is an impossible task. Yet, the absence of divine military commanders in portrayals of YHWH's divine army remains intriguing. Whether accidental or deliberate, the lack of officers in YHWH's divine army prevented the possibility that military upheavals to the earthly kingship could be mirrored in the divine sphere. It may have also aided the development of monotheistic rhetoric as no other deity was permitted involvement in YHWH's divine army and thus, in his victories.